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# Ephemera in the art library

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Art libraries acquire a large amount of ephemeral material which creates a unique resource on the history of contemporary art. Librarians have to decide what should be retained, how it should be stored, and how the material can best be accessed. Increasingly there is pressure to digitise in order to promote collections, but how effective this process is in terms of ephemeral material remains a real question. A survey of prominent collections in London and New York has helped to inform future plans for the ephemera held by the library at Chelsea College of Art & Design.

A recent exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, *Extra art*, concentrated on artists' ephemera. The catalogue published to accompany this exhibition defines art ephemera as material which is freely or inexpensively distributed, originating from either the artist, a gallery or other organisation or individual, and as

'... little movable works that travel by post or are taken away from the gallery by the visitor. In this way, art and information about art become one'.<sup>1</sup>

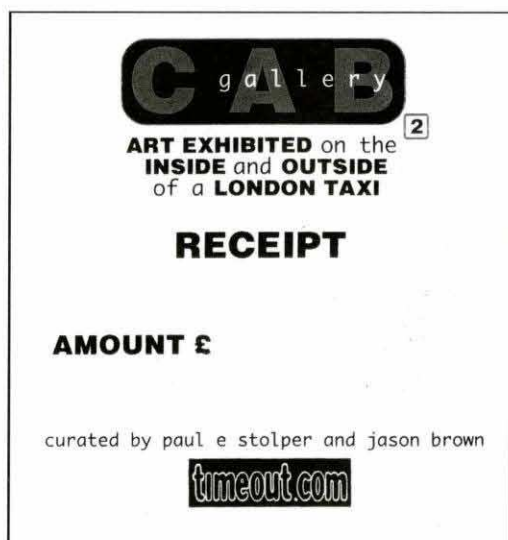
The *Extra art* exhibition proved to be a reflection of the considerable collection of art ephemera held in the

library at Chelsea College of Art & Design (CCAD). Various motives have prompted a reassessment of this collection and a consideration of what kinds of ephemera may, or should, usefully be collected by an art library. These can take a number of forms; can exist in two, three or virtual dimensions; and are widely varied in character. Formats include private view cards, exhibition announcements, press releases, artists' correspondence, posters and flyers, artists' multiples and three-dimensional objects, websites, emails and other digital formats.

Although the many disparate types of ephemera have different emphases and origins, all varieties can contribute to the study of artists and their work, and how those artists are perceived in the context of the contemporary art scene.

The CCAD Library collection dates from the 1970s and includes material up to the present day. Currently, access to this material is very poor; it is uncatalogued, and access depends on the personal knowledge of the staff. Awareness among users is therefore low, yet the collection's ability to document the development of the contemporary British art scene, its historical importance and potential as a research resource, cannot be underestimated. The ephemera collection is currently incorporated within the library's extensive collection of exhibition catalogues, with minimal consideration given to conservation storage standards. With the move of the college to a new site at Millbank imminent, however, now is the time to consider issues of access, preservation and storage.

Visits to institutions with similar collections proved useful in planning the future needs of the Chelsea collection. These were: in London, the National Art Library (NAL) and the British Council; and in New



Receipt from the Cab Gallery, Jason Brown c.2000.

York, the Frances Mulhall Achilles Library at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art Library (MoMA) and the New York Public Library (NYPL). All have large collections of modern and contemporary art ephemera (although both the NAL and the NYPL also cover a wider period) and active collection development policies. It was hoped that parallels could be drawn with the collection at Chelsea, highlighting the common problems faced and offering potential solutions. While valuable insight was gained, it unfortunately proved difficult to identify similar academic institutions with comparable collections. This reinforced our feeling that Chelsea is unusual in the emphasis it places on ephemera.

The most common manifestation of an ephemera collection is the artist's file. The NYPL states that

the Artist Files are an indispensable supplement to our biographical dictionaries, and contain information that cannot be found in other published sources.<sup>2</sup>

Some institutions, notably the NYPL, also maintain files on art organisations, creating an overall picture of the contemporary art scene in New York City and State. The NAL has taken a different approach, concentrating on individual artists and not retaining material originating from large group shows.

As an autonomous ephemera collection has yet to be established at Chelsea, it has been important to gain understanding of how these are administered elsewhere. The collections at the British Council, MoMA and the Whitney serve a mainly curatorial function, unlike the NYPL which offers a public service, or the NAL which combines both roles. The situation at Chelsea is different once again; the ephemera are a research resource for a wide-ranging educational community, yet the common model of closed access, alphabetically-arranged hanging files devoted to individual artists or organisations would be suitable for the majority of the collection and improve collection management on a daily basis.

Most collections grow as a result of donations from other departments within an institution, mainly curatorial, resulting in large gallery or museum libraries rarely needing to look elsewhere to acquire material. Large collections such as that at the NAL will also have material sent in bulk by members of the public and external researchers.

Some libraries play a more active part in developing their collection; at the British Council newspapers are cut regularly, and the NYPL (not having any curatorial input) is in the process of joining the mailing lists of the city's galleries. Chelsea's collection now grows

naturally through a combination of contributions from staff, students and artists, and items sent via mailing lists. Maintaining links with artists such as Inventory,

Please do not listen to the  
spirits. They are certainly  
not gentlemen.

*Sticker by Inventory, c.2000.*

and galleries such as the Cab Gallery, is an important aspect of the way in which ephemera is collected at Chelsea.

As with any collection, selection criteria are necessary for focus and to restrict duplication of other collections. For some, the boundaries are obvious: the British Council retains that which relates to British artists, and the Whitney does the same for American. For those with a less specific remit there is a requirement to know what is held elsewhere, and whether it is accessible for external users. For example, it may be considered that the NYPL is duplicating a similar collection at MoMA until it is recognised that it is a New York-specific collection, freely accessible to members of the public. The collection at Chelsea tends to reflect the teaching interests of the college, which explains the strong emphasis on the contemporary scene, particularly in London.

All libraries reported that ephemeral material is acquired at an alarming rate. A basic selection policy can ease the pressure in this respect. Museum and gallery libraries benefit from the help of volunteers to sort and file material. Both the Whitney and MoMA rely heavily upon this, as to some extent does the NAL. Due to this pressure, the Whitney has been actively identifying items in its ephemera collection which are of archival interest and passing them to the museum's Archive department. Resource sharing such as this is common within and between US institutions.

Once the decision about what to keep has been made, the question of format arises – is a copy sufficient, or should the original be kept? In the case of press cuttings it is common practice to keep a photocopy since newspaper will deteriorate. With all other items most libraries favour keeping the original, even if it has been digitised to improve access. The experience of the NYPL should be a warning to



anyone preparing to digitise. In the mid-1980s the NYPL obtained funding to microfilm the material held in the ephemera collections; the files were sent to London for filming and the material was subsequently, and regrettably, discarded.

Although an extremely worthwhile resource, especially for distance users such as the NAL who would not have access to the original material, there are several notable drawbacks to the NYPL microfiche: it is black and white when many of the originals were colour; some of the handwritten information, including dates, is illegible; the rear of some documents was filmed in error. In short, the general feeling is that, although invaluable in terms of access and long-term preservation, the microfilmed version is no substitute for the original material, which included rich media such as prints and photographs. Several boxes of material which escaped being discarded have recently been found and kept, to be re-incorporated into the collection at a later date, dependent on availability of volunteer help and funding.

As the situation at the NYPL shows, copying of complete ephemera collections has many access and storage advantages despite the loss of the unique quality of the original document. Today's solution to this problem is digitisation; however collections consist of many hundreds of thousands of items and to attempt to digitise any more than a snapshot of this would be a mammoth undertaking in terms of funding and time. It is not clear if the advantages make the process worthwhile; much serious research involving such material depends on the unique qualities that the original documentation can offer.

Part of the potential of digitisation, therefore, seems to lie in utilising it to draw users' attention to the

existence of ephemera collections, and to offer a taste of what lies beyond. At Chelsea some work has been done to this end; the archive of the artists' collective inventory has been used to create a visual interface to one of the special collections, which contains a proportion of ephemeral material.

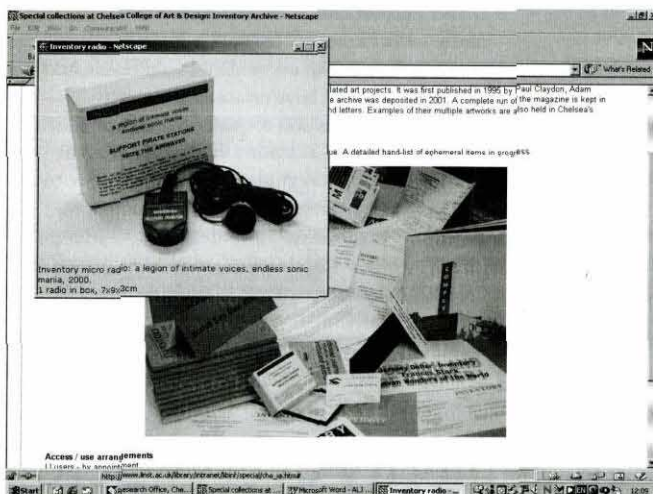
In general, the most successful and achievable utilisation of electronic resources in improving access to the collections appears to be the creation of local catalogue records for complete files of material. This has been undertaken by the NAL, MoMA, and at the Whitney. At the NAL, it has transformed access to ephemeral material and files are frequently requested by users. Although such cataloguing is a time-consuming process to initiate, once established much of the cataloguing work can be undertaken by volunteers (as at MoMA and the Whitney), who work to templates drawn up by a librarian. The NYPL has taken an even simpler route in creating a basic alphabetical index, available on their website.

In all the institutions, storage for two-dimensional ephemeral material is similar: hanging files in cabinets or cupboards. It was interesting to note that MoMA, in moving from Manhattan to Queens, had abandoned their 'rolling stack' version of the hanging file. Although this was perceived as a revolutionary, space-saving arrangement, it was discovered to be, in reality, inefficient in terms of space. MoMA have now returned to the traditional hanging file arrangement.

CCAD library has an active policy of collecting three-dimensional ephemera. Other institutions with such a collection proved elusive; within the museum context such items are generally held in curatorial collections, and where three-dimensional materials have found their way into library collections they are

an ongoing storage problem. At Chelsea such items are kept as part of the Artists' Multiples collection, due to convenience of storage, yet their ephemeral nature should not be forgotten when conducting research.

Environmental conditions are another major storage issue to consider. Both MoMA and the Whitney have purpose-built spaces with controlled conditions. At the Whitney the current review of the Artists Files will ensure that all the ephemera is eventually placed in acid-free folders. This is a model for other institutions to follow, and one that is certainly adhered to at the British Council. Libraries within museums benefit from the professional skill of in-house archivists and conservators. Elsewhere, the pressures of space,



CCAD Special Collections.

[http://www.linst.ac.uk/library/libinf/special/che\\_ia.htm](http://www.linst.ac.uk/library/libinf/special/che_ia.htm)

funding and staffing mean such conservation-standard measures have yet to be addressed.

At this point, it is pertinent to consider ephemera in digital formats, which introduces a range of preservation and storage issues. Currently, it seems that the only active form of preservation of digital ephemera in art library collections is to retain printed copies of selected electronic documents, such as press releases and gallery announcements. However, not all libraries do this and an active collection development policy in terms of digital ephemera remains a thing of the future. It may be that, at present, digital ephemera (which should not be confused with net art) is still being produced in multiple formats and that the digital version is purely supplementary to traditional print.

In conclusion, it is apparent that public institutions do actively collect ephemera and that they are treated as an important resource, particularly at institutions such as the Whitney, where ephemeral documentation has contributed to several major research projects, and at the NAL, where ephemera files are requested by users on a daily basis. Importantly, the sharing of ephemeral archives is widespread amongst US institutions, each of the institutions visited having its niche in the wider circle of research resources in the area. This approach highlights the fact that these collections are unique, irreplaceable and highly valued, and therefore must be preserved efficiently.

Although online access to ephemera collections is limited, there has been a definite attempt to improve this situation with basic cataloguing. As the microfilming experience at NYPL has highlighted, any future moves towards digitisation must ensure that information is retained, and the process must be undertaken by professionals with an understanding of the nature of the materials.

All the collections visited were strongly in favour of effectively conserving collections in their existing formats and were not considering any extensive digitisation programs. Digitisation, it was felt, was more suited to smaller projects, for promotional and specific research purposes. One such project was the Whitney's examination in 2000 of the papers relating to the painter Arshile Gorky. The resulting illustrated essay is a fine example of the potential for ephemera online.<sup>4</sup> Much of the illustrating material, such as

newspaper cuttings, postcards and press releases, originated from the artist ephemera files at the Whitney.

With all this in mind, a number of points have arisen to be taken into consideration as Chelsea moves its collections to a new site:

#### Access

- In order to improve access and enable conservation-standard storage, the ephemeral material must be kept as a separate entity. All institutions visited employ this arrangement, and it is apparent that their collections are both easier to manage and to access.
- Some minimal cataloguing, in the form of basic local records, is essential in order to raise awareness of the collection and enable improved access for users.

#### Storage

- Exclusive storage would considerably aid the preservation of delicate and fragile material.
- Conservation-approved, acid-free folders must be used for storage as standard.
- Storage of the collection of three-dimensional material at Chelsea remains problematic. This is an area that requires further research and possibly the experience of museum curators, or archivists who deal with objects, can give some guidance with this element of the collection.

#### Promotion

- Under current circumstances, extensive promotion of the collection is not feasible because of the potential increase in use which would result, and the impact this would have on staff. Ultimately, however, the collection requires promotion which could be achieved in a number of ways, such as
  - a limited digital guide as a visual interface to the collection, using copyright-cleared images, created and linked to the library web site.
  - production and distribution of an informative printed guide.



an end to all authority everywhere

Sticker by *Inventory*, c. 2001.



- Increased awareness of the collection would also aid collection development in the form of donations.

For a resource such as that at Chelsea, the primary issue is to make the existence of the collection as a whole known and to employ the most effective storage arrangements to enable access, while also taking conservation into consideration. Conservation standards for ephemera, particularly in museums, are high, with some collections even housed in controlled environments. Chelsea is in the fortunate position of having the opportunity in the near future to rethink its approach to the management of collections such as this and to put improvements into action.

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